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AUTHOR Fine, Marlene G.
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ABSTRACT

Demographic trends reported in "Workforce 2000" by the Hudson Institute in 1987 demonstrate a need for organizations to develop opportunities for individuals to better understand their own discourse patterns and the patterns of others. Human resource executives surveyed in 1990 were concerned about (1) the ability to motivate diverse groups of employees; (2) differences in values and cultural norms among employees; and (3) the challenge of communicating when employees speak different languages and have different cultural assumptions. At the present, time organizations attempt to fit everyone who enters the workforce into a preexisting vision of corporate culture. A multicultural organizational discourse would invite everyone to participate in the dialogue in their genuine voices. Conceptualizing and creating such a discourse, however, is not easy. In conversations between privileged and non-privileged participants, the privileged voices dominate the discourse. Resisting privileged discourse, however, is a necessary prerequisite to creating harmonic discourse. White male discourse needs to move out of the center of the conversation. Once people learn ways to resist privilege, either asserting their own or allowing others to assert theirs, pragmatic considerations will force the creation of harmonic discourse, a discourse in which all voices retain their individual integrity yet combine to form a whole discourse that is orderly and congruous, in much the same way that musicians create harmony through the combination of simultaneous notes to form chords. (PRA)

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# MULTICULTURAL VOICES IN THE WORKPLACE: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE YEAR 2000

Marlene G. Fine
University of Massachusetts at Boston
ECA Annual Conference
April 26, 1991

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MULTICULTURAL VOICES IN THE WORKPLACE:
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When Sandra called and asked me to be on this panel, I immediately said yes. First, because the topic is central to my research interests and personal commitments. Second, and, perhaps, even more importantly, because she envisioned these presentations as provocative position papers rather than academic research reports, and, as those who know me will attest, I like few things better than being provocative, which the OED defines as "stimulating and irritating."

As you know, the purpose of this panel is to explore the ways in which the changing demographics of the U.S. will affect three contexts (education, organizational life, and mass media) and to suggest proactive changes in each of these contexts for meeting the challenges created by the new demographics. My presentation focuses on organizational life.

The Workforce 2000 report by the Hudson Institute (Johnston & Packer, 1987) identified five demographic trends in the U.S. that will dramatically affect organizational life in the next century:

(1) Both the population and the workforce will grow more slowly.

(2) The average age of the workforce will increase and the pool of young workers will decrease.

(3) More women will enter the workforce.

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(4) Minorities will increase their share of new entrants into the workforce.

(5) Immigrants will make up the largest share of the increase in the workforce since World War I.

These five demographic trends (mathematics to the contrary) add up to two significant facts about the workforce of the future. First, that workforce will be much more diverse than it is now. Although white males will continue to maintain a numerical edge for some time into the next decade, they will be a shrinking number of new entrants into the labor pool. The new workforce will comprise greater diversity of gender, race, age, culture, and language.

Second, apart from the cyclical demand changes created during downturns in the economy or the structural demand changes created as old industries decline and new ones emerge, demand for workers will exceed the supply of those previously defined as "qualified," thus creating intense competition among organizations for workers. The competition for trained professional and technical personnel and supervisory/managerial personnel will be especially intense. This second "fact" about the workforce is important because it provides a bottom line motivation for dealing, in a serious and substantial way, with the first "fact"--the increasing cultural diversity of the workplace.

Although some U.S. companies that produce consumer goods and are seeking new markets, both here and around the world, are beginning to understand the importance of having employees who

represent diverse cultural interests, most organizations have taken a more near-sighted view, opening their doors to women and minorities only because they must comply with federal affirmative action laws, not because they believe that doing so is in their best strategic interests. The projected shortage of white male workers places a premium on workers of color and women and creates a strategic incentive for organizations to recruit, hire, develop, promote, and retain them.

To see how organizations are responding to the demographic changes identified in Workforce 2000, the Hudson Institute and Towers Perrin, an international management consulting firm, recently surveyed senior human resource executives at 645 U.S. organizations, asking them about their level of concern about the human resource issues in the report and the ways their organizations were dealing with or planning to deal with these issues (Workforce 2000, 1990). They report four key findings of the survey:

(1) The workforce is already diverse. Of the organizations in the sample, 60 percent report that workers of color represent up to 20 percent of their workforce, and close to 25 percent say they represent over 26 percent of their workforce.

(2) Cultural diversity is a paramount concern to these organizations. Diversity concerns focus on the hiring and promotion of people of color and (what the human resource executives define as) the special needs of women, e.g., child care,

family leave, and flexible work schedules.

(3) Some companies are responding to the particular issues raised in the original Workforce 2000 report, but they are implementing very traditional solutions, e.g., to deal with the lack of basic skills of many new entrants into the labor force, many companies offer tuition reimbursement to employees, but few companies offer in-house remedial training programs.

(4) Developing new approaches is a function of top management. If senior management believes that the organization must respond to the changing demographics, the organization is more likely to develop new approaches to those changes.

These findings are not surprising. Most people in the U.S., especially those who live in urban areas on either coast, see the changing demographics of the population every morning as they leave their homes for work. People who work for both large and small organizations know that those organizations rarely develop and implement genuinely "new" approaches to solving problems. And those of us who study organizations, know that change usually cannot be effected without the strong support of senior management.

What is surprising in the Towers Perrin report, however, is how the human resource executives in the survey articulated their concerns about managing cultural diversity. They said they were most concerned about three managerial issues:

(1) the ability to motivate diverse groups of employees;

(2) differences in values and cultural norms among employees;

(3) the challenge of communicating when employees speak different languages and have different cultural assumptions.

Their concerns are well-founded, for these issues--linguistic and cultural differences, which we know as communicative differences--are the crux of the problems organizations with a culturally diverse workforce will face in the next century. Despite their understanding of the problems created by cultural diversity, most of the executives said that their companies are not dealing with the issues: 25 percent said their corporate cultures are not open to diversity, 29 percent said that discrimination against people of color is a problem in their organizations, and 15 percent said there is overt harassment of people of color. The Towers Perrin report concluded that little beyond recruitment of employees of color is being done in these organizations to address the concerns of cultural diversity.

Why? I believe it is because our theoretical conceptions of organizational communication are based on the assumptions of homogeneity and cooperation rather than difference and conflict, assumptions which may have served us well when the range of cultural differences in the workforce was minimal, but which cannot provide a vision of the multicultural discourse necessary to create and sustain organizations in the next century.

In a recent conversation, Stephen Bookbinder (1991), a principal in Towers Perrin, told me that he thought that many companies have done well in responding to the increasing number of

women entering the workforce. He pointed to childcare policies and flextime as examples of ways that companies have responded to women's concerns. Companies have not done as well in responding to the needs of minorities, however, because "we don't know what to do." I think he is right--not about how well companies have responded to the needs of women but about not knowing what to do. Bookbinder's explanation of what companies have done for women and have failed to do for people of color demonstrates my point.

Despite their apparent newness, on-site childcare, maternity leave, and flextime are traditional solutions to the changing gender mix in the workplace. They are concepts that emerge from a fundamental belief that family issues are a "woman's problem." These "solutions" give women the freedom to participate in the workforce. But they are not approaches that recognize the different cultural assumptions that women bring into the workplace and the ways that those assumptions shape women's organizational experiences. Such traditional solutions attempt to accommodate women in the existing corporate culture, but do not shape a corporate culture that is inclusive of women's voices.

The same is true for the "solutions" that many believe are critical in meeting the needs of people of color. Johnston and Packer (1987) in Workforce 2000 state that "minority workers are not only less likely to have had satisfactory schooling and on-the-job training, they may have language, attitude, and cultural problems that prevent them from taking advantage of the jobs that

will exist" (p.xxvi). This approach is the "primitive model" of minority participation in the workforce. The implicit assumption of the model is that people of color are primitives, who lack the appropriate skills, behaviors, and values to work productively in organizations. To bring people of color into the workforce, organizations need to civilize them by providing remedial skills training, including ESL and dialect reduction, and mentoring relationships so that they can learn the appropriate behaviors and values.

At its best, the primitive model is simplistic; at its worst, racist. I do not mean to suggest that many immigrants do not need to learn to read, write, and speak English; or that many people of color in the U.S. have not received an inferior education and lack training in basic skills. To argue that would deny the reality of life in the U.S. for people of color and would ignore the pragmatic need of organizations to employ workers who share a common language and possess basic verbal, mathematical, and analytical skills. But those requirements are true for all workers, regardless of gender, color, or cultural background. Inadequate written and oral communication skills are the most often cited reasons for rejecting job candidates--regardless of race. Yet we never talk about the "white" problem in organizations, only about the "minority" problem. Focusing on the need for people of color in particular to speak English and possess basic skills allows organizations to shift responsibility for change onto a particular group of workers.

More importantly, just as the accommodations for women do not address the need to create an organizational culture that includes women's voices, the primitive model glosses over the changes that are needed to include the many voices of workers who represent diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

It is now a commplace in organizational theory that organizations are built upon a masculine ethic (Kanter, 1977) that pervades our assumptions about who should manage and how they should do it. Wilbert Moore's characterization of the organization as a kinship system based on homosexual reproduction, a social structure in which, as Kanter (1977) says, "the men who manage reproduce themselves in kind" (p.48), has remained the defining metaphor for organizations--even in the face of the demographic changes documented in Workforce 2000.

The current approach to understanding cultural diversity in organizations is based on that same kinship system. Organizations are attempting to fit everyone who enters the workforce into a preexisting vision of corporate culture. In the face of the kind of extraordinary cultural changes that are happening throughout the U.S., we continue to cling to the belief that a Western white male vision of organizational life is not only the only vision but is the appropriate vision for organizations which will be created and sustained by the discourses of people of diverse cultural perspectives.

I have no easy answers. I think we don't know what to do

because we have no visions of discourse in which one form is not privileged over another.(1) Hierarchical, oppositional categories are so embedded in Western thinking that it is difficult, if not impossible, to begin to contemplate an organizational discourse that invites everyone to participate in the dialogue in their genuine voices and allows and values the expression of conflicting cultural styles. Yet that is exactly the kind of discourse we need to create if we expect a culturally diverse workforce to work together productively.

A multicultural organizational discourse invites everyone, regardless of cultural background, to participate in the dialogue in their genuine voices. Conceptualizing and creating such a discourse is not easy. Let me give you three examples of organizational discourses among diverse peoples in which I recently participated.

(1) A recent meeting of the Board of Directors of a non-profit agency that works with public housing tenants: The Board is multiracial and 51 percent of the members live in public housing. The chair (an African American woman who is a tenant and an MIT graduate student) asked for comments about a proposal to hire a tenant board member as a consultant to the organization. After several non-tenant members spoke, the chair said she was concerned that tenants had not voiced their opinions. She asked them to respond. They remained silent; one finally said she agreed with what the others had said--even though conflicting opinions had been

voiced among the more privileged members of the Board (privileged by virtue of their class, educational background, and professional titles).

(2) The same Board meeting: I presented a progress report on a project I am doing with the agency staff and the tenant organizations for 11 public housing developments. A small part of the report focused on some preliminary findings from discussions with members of some of the tenant organizations. The findings suggested that the relationships between the larger organization and the tenant organizations when the tenant organizations were primarily African American were more adversarial than when the tenant organizations were primarily white. The African Americans on the staff and on the Board were not surprised by my comment and they were pleased that the issue was out on the table. The white administrative staff were angry and defensive, primarily because the comment both suggested that there is conflict among staff and tenants and also created conflict on the Board--and public conflict is unacceptable for organizations who are dependent on external funding. The African American staff concluded that this response was simply another example of white refusal to hear their voices.

(3) A first meeting of an external corporate advisory board: The advisory board comprises three African Americans and one Asian American. They have come to the campus for the first time to meet with faculty to discuss possible curricular changes and other strategies for making the college more responsive to the needs of

a culturally diverse student body. The white male faculty member who organized the meeting began by giving a 30 minute presentation (the meeting was scheduled for one hour) in which he laid out in complete detail the projects the college plans to develop. When he concluded and asked for comments, the advisory board members were silent.

None of the conversations that I have described here allowed everyone present to participate fully. Instead, in each situation a privileged voice or voices dominated the discourse, even when the less privileged were invited into the conversation. The conversational terms were such that others could not either speak in their genuine voices or could not be heard when they did speak.

So what can organizations do to create a multicultural organizational discourse? In a recent article (Fine, 1991), I suggest a two part framework for understanding multicultural communication in organizations: (1) resisting privileged discourse, and (2) creating harmonic discourse. Resisting privileged discourse is a necessary prerequisite to creating harmonic discourse. White male discourse needs to move out of the center of the conversation, allowing other discourses to be heard. That movement can be voluntary or it can be forced through resistance by the less privileged. I am doing some consulting work in an organization in which the employees have established ground rules for conversational interaction. At staff meetings, two men may not speak in succession, and a man may never speak unless a

woman has already responded to the point. Such rules help empower women to speak. Although the rules do not guarantee that men will listen to what women say, they do raise men's consciousness about how they tend to dominate conversations in this organization. The fact that the employees in this organization have recognized that the discourse has not allowed everyone access to the conversation and that they have together chosen to do change the conversational rules starts the process of resistance.

Organizations need to start by developing opportunities for individuals to better understand their own discourse patterns and the patterns of others. Some of us need to learn ways to step out of the center; others need to discover their own voices. I suspect that once we learn ways to resist privilege, either asserting our own or allowing others to assert theirs, pragmatic considerations will force us to create harmonic discourse, a discourse in which all voices retain their individual integrity yet combine to form a whole discourse that is orderly and congruous, in much the same way that musicians create harmony through the "combination of simultaneous notes to form chords" (Compact Edition of the OED, 1971, p. 1259). The demographic trends in Workforce 2000 make it clear that we have no other choice.

## Note

(1) The "we" I am referring to here is self-inclusive and highly ethnocentric. I do not include here those academics and practitioners whose cultural backgrounds give them access to other visions of organizing experience.

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